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ABSTRACT

Drawing on the collective experience of the researchers, their work with teachers and principals, and their previous research in urban schools where students are predominantly Mexican American, this essay outlines the ways in which the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) harms the educational quality and opportunity of minority, economically disadvantaged youth. The pressure to raise TAAS scores leads teachers to spend time drilling on practice examination materials. Subjects tested by the TAAS are reduced to isolated skills and fragments of fact. Writing instruction is replaced by instruction in writing the rote form of the five-paragraph persuasive essay required by the TAAS. As a management system, the TAAS encourages administrators and teachers to aim school instruction at the lowest level of information and skills, to the neglect of complex assignments and content. The TAAS crowds out other forms of learning in many urban schools, and it encourages the diversion of scarce school resources into TAAS preparation materials. The TAAS system of testing does not agree with what is known in research on children's learning, and the generic TAAS curriculum is divorced from the experiences, language, and culture of minority children, especially those of limited English proficiency. (Contains 19 references.) (SLD)

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The Harmful Impact of the TAAS System of Testing in Texas: Beneath the Accountability Rhetoric

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Introduction

The myth of standardized testing is that it raises the quality of education to its highest levels and does so in ways that are measurable and generalizable. Within this view, the failure of schools is a failure of management due to an inability of their "lowest level" employees (i.e., the teachers) to induce achievement in their students. The remedy derived from this view of schooling is to create a management system that will change behavior through more accountability.

Enacted by the Texas state legislature in spring 1990, the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) system of testing and test-driven curriculum is just such an accountability system (Texas Education Agency 1998). It is the most recent in a series of centralized, standardizing "reforms" in this state. It differs from earlier test systems in being increasingly tied to teacher and principal tenure and pay. Rather than raising the quality of education to its highest levels, however, there is increasing evidence that the TAAS testing system harms children's learning in a variety of intersecting, cross-cutting ways that we address herein.

The policy rhetoric surrounding the TAAS goes something like the following: By measuring student performance on a computer-scored standardized test, inferences can be drawn about the quality of teacher and principal performance, as well as the aggregate quality of the school. School ratings, periodically published in full-page spreads in the state's newspapers, now serve as barometers for the condition of education in the state. Hence, important decisions on personnel and alleged quality of schooling now evolve around a single indicator. There are clearly serious problems when any single indicator is used to assess the quality of so complex an enterprise as educating children.

What we want to focus on is not the general problems that are typically raised (e.g., probable impacts of particular questions, cut-off scores for passing, psychometric properties of the test, etc.), which are quite real, but rather another which is frequently overlooked: The direct, negative impact that this accountability system is having on the education of this state's most economically disadvantaged, minority children. *What we are seeing is not the "misuse" of the*

TAAS testing system, but the playing out of its inherent logic at the expense of our poorest, minority children.

One gains added perspective on this misguided policy when considering the preponderance of minority youth in large urban school districts. In the Houston Independent School District (HISD), for example, 52.5 percent and 34.1 percent of all students are either Latino or African American, respectively, while 10.6 percent are Anglo. Moreover, 73 percent of the total are either on free or reduced lunch (HISD District and School Profiles 1997-98).

To fully assess the impact that this system of testing is having on the education of minority youth, it is also essential to understand how this system is operationalized in classrooms. One of the misleading features of this testing system is that publishing scores disaggregated by the race and ethnicity of the children alert the public to inequities. More substantively, however, these scores are misleading and diversionary because they mask the inequities produced when schools raise test scores at the expense of substantive learning. The scores also loom so largely that they overshadow discussion on what would be other more telling indicators of quality of education such as the degree of segregation, the level of poverty, or the number of students taking the SAT and going to college.

Drawing on our collective experience in schools, our extensive work with teachers and principals, and our research in urban schools where children are predominantly Mexican American and African American (McNeil 1988, 2000, forthcoming; Valenzuela 1997; 1998; 1999), we are able to document the ways this testing system harms the educational quality and educational opportunity of minority, economically disadvantaged youth. Our presence in schools and classrooms and our frequent interactions with students, teachers, and administrators have enabled us to capture the voices and experiences of the students themselves. These interactions and observations further undergird our view that this is a pervasive problem, not an isolated one.

Our critique is organized around very specific and documented harmful effects of the TAAS system of testing on the quality of instruction and the curriculum, as well as its effects on

resource allocation for the education of minority youth.[1] Because of their dramatically increasing representation in our nation's largest school districts, a section below also addresses in some detail the significance of the TAAS test for Limited English Proficient (LEP) youth in our schools.[2]

In many urban schools, whose students are overwhelmingly poor and African American and Latino, the TAAS system of testing reduces the quality and quantity of subjects being tested by TAAS.

The pressure to raise TAAS scores leads teachers to spend class time, often several hours each week, drilling students on practice exam materials. Much of this time is spent learning how to bubble-in answers, how to weed out obviously wrong answers, and how to become accustomed to multiple-choice, computer-scored formats. This TAAS drill takes time from real teaching and learning. In the name of "alignment" between course curricula and test, TAAS drills are becoming the curriculum in our poorest schools.

The pressure to raise TAAS scores leads teachers to substitute commercial TAAS-prep materials for the substance of the curriculum. Principals, deans of instruction, and other building or central office administrators, urge or even require teachers to set aside the course curriculum and to use the TAAS-prep materials in their place. This practice is more common in traditionally low-performing schools, the schools attended by low-income and non-Anglo children. While middle-class children in white, middle class schools are reading literature, learning a variety of forms of writing, studying mathematics aimed at problem-solving and conceptual understanding

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[1]Because the TAAS test has changed over the years, longitudinal analyses are impossible due to an incomparability of data. Currently, the key testing benchmarks established by the State Board of Education and the Texas Education Agency are at the fourth-, eighth-, and tenth-grade levels (Texas Education Agency 1998)

[2]In the HISD alone, 58,000 students (or 27.6 percent) were classified as LEP youth (HISD District and School Profiles 1997-98).

-- in essence, receiving an education appropriate for their age and grade level, poor and minority children are devoting class time to practice test materials whose purpose is to help children pass the TAAS. The TAAS system of testing thus widens the gap between the public education provided for poor and minority children and that of children in traditionally higher-scoring (that is, Anglo and wealthier) schools. An experienced Anglo English teacher at Seguín High School, a predominantly Mexican HISD school, commented that she teaches "less" English each year[3]:

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[3]All references to Seguin High School (pseudonym) are based on a larger, three-year case study of one particular HISD school attended mostly by low-income Mexican immigrant and Mexican American youth. In her book, Subtractive Schooling: U.S.-Mexican Youth and the Politics of Caring, Valenzuela develops her central thesis that schools like Seguin subtract resources from youth (Valenzuela 1999). Her research findings lead her to critique the practice of cultural assimilation which characterizes most schooling for U.S.-Mexican youth.

Besides being a segregated school, Seguín mirrors other national trends. The dropout rate is at least 50 percent while the state and national dropout rate is around 40 percent (The Houston Evaluation of Community Priorities Project 1994; Valdivieso 1986). Between twelve and fifteen hundred students enter the ninth grade each year and only four to five hundred students graduate in any given year. In March of 1993, 19 percent of the senior class had passed all three portions of the TAAS test. A year later, slightly more students (21 percent) had passed all three portions of the TAAS test, resulting in a ranking that made Seguín one school above the worst high school in the entire district. In 1993-94, 540 seniors were enrolled and only 350 graduated. About 100 students actually showed up for graduation.

Low expectations are virtually built into this school: Were students to progress normally from one grade to the next, there would be no space to house them. As things stand, Seguin's three-thousand-plus student body is crammed into a physical facility capable of housing no more than 2,600 students. Due to the school's high failure and dropout rates, more than half of the school population is always comprised of freshmen. Although their TAAS test scores have increased in more recent years, graduation rates have remained low.

> Less as time goes on. Less as time goes on with the TAAS test thing. Because we have to devote so much time to the specific functions of the TAAS test, it's harder and harder [to teach English].

Subjects tested by TAAS (reading, writing and mathematics) are reduced, in the test and in the test-prep materials, to isolated skills and fragments of fact. This artificial treatment of the these isolated components may enable children to recognize those components on a multiple-choice test, but does not necessarily enable them to use these components in other contexts. For example, high school teachers report that although practice tests and classroom drills have raised the pass rate for the reading section of the TAAS at their school, few of their students are able to use those same skills for actual reading. These students are passing the TAAS reading by being able to select among answers given; they are not able to read assignments, to make meaning of literature, to complete reading assignments outside of class, nor to connect reading assignments to other parts of the course such as discussion and writing.

Middle school teachers report that the TAAS emphasis on reading short passages, then selecting among answers given to questions based on those short passages, has made it very difficult for students to read a sustained reading assignment. After several years in classes where the "reading" assignments were increasingly TAAS practice materials, children were unable to read even a novel two years below grade level.

In writing, students are increasingly being asked to write repetitively in only the format of that year's TAAS writing objective. One African American parent, whose first son received an excellent fourth grade education in a Texas elementary school three years ago, reported that this past fall when her second son entered fourth grade at the school, the entire fourth-grade curriculum had disappeared. The teachers, facilities and principal were all the same, but the fourth grade curriculum which had served children well had been replaced by daily writing of the persuasive essay, according to the strict TAAS format for that essay.

Writing as it relates to thinking, to language development and fluency, to understanding one's audience, to enriching one's vocabulary, to develop ideas all had been replaced by TAAS writing practice. "Writing" no longer bore any resemblance to what research shows to be a developmental activity in children's language competency. Teachers who are a part of the growing national professional community of teachers of writing find their professional expertise in conflict with the rote forms of the five-paragraph essay, the artificial prose called for by the TAAS.

Even students complain about the persuasive essay. For example, an intellectually gifted, Mexican American senior male located (i.e., misplaced) in Seguín High School's regular track, feels that the school's priorities are misplaced. In his view, the school should be preparing students for the SAT. On the subject of many of his peers' academic limitations, he provided the following commentary:

> I've realized that the kids have good arguments here, but they have absolutely no argument skills. They probably have persuasive skills for the TAAS. Argument skills, none. The only argument they have is probably to curse. Say the F-word and that's it.

Reflecting on a conversation he had on the subject of the college application process with his friends, he further places the onus of students' limitations on the school itself:

> They [friends] were telling me that they are kind of fed up with that [the persuasive essay] because here are kids that are filling out scholarship applications and essays. They are writing essays and they don't know how to write anything else but a persuasive essay for the TAAS. They prepare us for the TAAS, and we are not just test takers. I try to explain to people that we are not just persons who need to develop critical thinking skills on how to choose between five things; how to choose the correct answer out of five. That's nothing!

The required "TAAS objectives" or "TAAS prompts" which are to be drilled each day are often presented to teachers as five- to ten-minute exercises. However, teachers report that drilling to these prompts, often required by the administration if their children are poor and minority (with a history of low scores), frequently usurp so much of the class period that little time is left for teaching and learning.

It is a myth that TAAS sets the minimum standards and that teachers are encouraged to go beyond that. In many schools, it is the richest curriculum and the best-prepared teachers who are required to scale back in order to make what is taught consistent with the sequence and format of the TAAS. In low-performing schools, even the most knowledgeable teachers are asked to set aside their lesson plans and materials to teach to the TAAS.

The TAAS system of testing reduces the quality and quantity of course content in subjects <u>not</u> tested by TAAS because teachers are encouraged or required to substitute preparation for the TAAS test for the curriculum in those courses.

Because science is not yet subject to TAAS testing, many science teachers in schools with poor and minority children are required by their principals to suspend the teaching of science for weeks, and in some cases for months, in order to devote science class time to drill and practice on the math sections of the TAAS. The first loss, of course, is the chance to learn science. The second is the chance to learn to become highly knowledgeable in mathematics. Many science teachers have little background in mathematics; the "mathematics" they are doing is drill and practice with commercial TAAS-prep materials. The direct loss of both science and mathematics learning is clear. Less obvious, but equally important, is the way this practice widens the gap between the science learning in middle class, higher performing schools where children continue to study science while the poor and minority children are interrupting science class to drill for the math TAAS.

Science, social studies and other core subjects are frequently suspended or interrupted for TAAS preparation. For instance, all history and social studies teachers in one school were told

several months in advanced of the TAAS to spend twenty minutes a day preparing students for the TAAS. According to one of these teachers,

> Twenty minutes is just too much. By the time we get to teaching our history lesson, most of the time is gone. And then it's hard to re-capture the rhythm of the previous day's lesson, which was also interrupted by the TAAS.

Elective subjects are also often required to set aside the curriculum in order to devote time to TAAS prep. Art teachers report that they are required to drill on the grammar sections of TAAS. An ROTC instructor was assigning the five-paragraph essay each week, not to link writing to ROTC but to add another drill to the regimen, this time in a rote essay.

The TAAS as a management system encourages administrators and teachers in traditionally low-performing schools especially to aim school instruction at the lowest level of information and skills, to the neglect of complex assignments and content.

Again, in poorer schools this translates into expenditures of time, teacher energy, and instructional dollars, into staff conferences and materials production (even pep rallies) aimed at raising TAAS scores rather than at improving educational quality.

Increasingly, expenditures for management and "alignment" systems are displacing instructional expenditures, and expenditures for management conferences and consulting around increasing compliance with TAAS are displacing programs of teacher learning and professional pedagogical development.

In those districts where schools' TAAS scores are tied to incentive pay for teachers or principals, and where TAAS-based performance contracts have replaced tenure, there is an even greater tendency for school personnel to shift dollars away from instruction and into the expensive TAAS-prep and "alignment" materials and consultants. Again, frequently these incentives are applied in schools or districts whose populations are poor or minority or both.

The TAAS system of testing—which represents an increasing emphasis on preparing students for the tests—crowds out other forms of learning in many urban schools, particularly those whose children are poor and non-Anglo.

Teachers report that the pressure to drill for TAAS has caused them to omit or severely decrease other forms of learning because of the lack of time or because their principals are urging them to devote time only to those activities which will be measured by the TAAS. Library research, independent projects, science experiments, oral histories, long-term writing assignments, writing assignments different from those being tested in a particular year, longer-term reading assignments that include related writing and speaking activities are all being eliminated or reduced, even though they are highly motivating for children and engage them in higher-order problem solving and thinking, in those schools (poor, minority) where TAAS scores have been low.

Inasmuch as certain students are required to take courses like "TAAS Math" and "TAAS English" to ensure their passing of the exit exam, the quality of substantive academic content gets sacrificed. Referred to as "local credit," such courses do not count toward the 24 credits that are required toward high school graduation. Since they are not "real" math and English courses, they are not taken very seriously by the students. The curriculum in these classes is predictably fragmented and incoherent because teachers teach abstracted pieces of the curriculum in order to cover the various segments of the exam.

Placement in these courses is also bureaucratically and pedagogically wasteful since the course is geared around the exam. If a student is enrolled in a fall TAAS course and takes and passes the exam in October, they have to wait out the rest of the semester in that "non-course" until it is over. An administrator from one of the larger, well-integrated HISD schools where such courses are offered told us that students start skipping class after they pass the TAAS test "since the course doesn't count toward high school credit anyway." According to this individual, it is also wasteful if the students fail the fall exam because they have to sign up a

second time in another such course, expanding to a whole year the time that they are not in the regular curriculum. In addition, of course, students must meet the normal math and English requirements for graduation. Additional requirements tend to also translate either into summer school attendance or graduating off schedule.

While Anglo and middle class children in this same school overwhelmingly pass the TAAS test within the context of the normal curriculum, an entire segment of its population is being subjected to months, if not years, of TAAS prep. By treating them as if they are unteachable, the system itself engenders a cumulative deficit in students' knowledge, encouraging their resistance not to education, but to *schooling* (Valenzuela 1999). Since the content of schooling is already deemed by many regular track (non-honors or college-bound) youth to be boring, unrewarding, and irrelevant to their lives, we are seeing the even greater sense of alienation that the TAAS system of testing promotes.

Preliminary research is showing that those schools that score higher on TAAS (usually wealthier, with fewer minority children) rarely teach directly to the TAAS. They teach children; they teach science, math, social studies, literature, writing, the arts. They teach the subjects. A tortured logic governs the highly prescriptive administration of the TAAS in predominantly minority schools: If the scores increase, it is because the school taught more to the test; however, if the scores decrease, the school needs to teach more to the test.

The TAAS system of testing encourages, in low performing schools, the diversion of scarce school resources (including dollars for instructional materials) into TAAS-prep materials rather than the kinds of instructional resources available to teachers and children in middle-class and wealthy schools.

One largely Hispanic, traditionally low-performing high school with virtually no library, a severe shortage of textbooks and little laboratory equipment for its students, spent $20,000 – almost its entire instructional budget -- for a set of commercial test-prep materials and required even its best teachers to set aside their high-quality lessons and replace them with the test-prep

materials. Scores on some sections of the TAAS did go up, but teachers report that students' actual capacity to read, to handle high school level assignments, to engage in serious thought and be able to follow through on work actually declined.

This school, touted in the newspapers for increasing the TAAS passing rate on reading, is now searching for a way to counter what is seen by the faculty as a serious deficiency in the students' ability to read. It is clear that higher scores do not mean that children are learning to a higher level. They may mean that nothing is being taught except TAAS-prep.

The press to spend instructional dollars on test-prep materials is widespread, especially among those schools with poor and minority children, where test scores have been low. These are typically the schools with a history of underfunding, with fewer instructional resources. While wealthier districts are spending money on high quality instructional materials which advance their children's education and place them in the national mainstream of what is considered to be a quality education, scarce instructional dollars are being spent in poor and minority children's schools on test prep materials or expensive "alignment" systems whose only value is to increase TAAS scores, not to produce educated children well prepared for college or future work.

This diversion of dollars away from children include diverting instructional dollars into expensive materials for "alignment" and "accountability" systems and consultants; it also includes diverting dollars from Texas classrooms to out-of-state vendors of tests, test-prep materials, consultants and related materials. Middle class and wealthy districts either do not spend money on these TAAS-related systems or they have the capacity to make up the difference in local funding for schools; either way, this diversion of dollars in poorer and minority districts further widens the gap between the quality of education offered to these children and that provided to wealthier children.

The TAAS system of testing goes against what is known in research on children's learning.

Research on children's learning shows that learning is not linear, that it must build on what children already know and understand, that it must engage children's active thinking, that it must engage many senses. In a striking contrast, the TAAS reinforces one particular mode of learning.

This mode of learning is to learn from discreet, randomly selected, brief pieces of information. The reading comprehension and grammatical sections of the writing TAAS, for example, teach isolated skills through very brief written passages. These written passages are not intended to build a cumulative knowledge base; they are not meant to connect with children's understanding. The isolated skills are presented in fragments, carefully sequenced to match the fragmented and isolated skills in the Texas curriculum frameworks. Learning fragments of fact and skill out of context is known to be counterproductive to understanding and to building cumulative skills which can be applied in an unfamiliar setting or to unfamiliar information in the future.

Two features of the TAAS and TAAS-prep materials are especially damaging to learning. The first is that under the TAAS system, students are to choose among possible answers that are given to them; they rarely have to think on their own, puzzle out a problem, come up with a possible answer, or articulate an idea. This engenders passivity and a dependent learning style that fails to develop many essential cognitive skills. In addition, it presents the child with choices, of which all but one are incorrect. To the extent that children, especially in poor and minority schools, are taught a curriculum and test drills that are in the TAAS format, they are spending three-quarters of their learning time considering erroneous, "wrong" material. It is doubtful that there is no respectable learning theory that advocates children's continual exposure to incorrect material. Again, the TAAS system places at risk those children in schools heavily emphasizing TAAS scores (usually poor and minority). They not only fail to learn the same rich, complex material that children in middle class schools would be learning, but they are simultaneously required to devote hours and hours each week to a de facto worthless curriculum.

The generic curriculum inherent in the TAAS system of testing is divorced from children's experiences, language and cultures.

It is not respectful of, nor does it build on, children's personal experiences, the cultures of their families, nor the variations in learning style and interests that span any classroom ("subtractive schooling" [Valenzuela 1997, 1998, 1999] is a term that captures this problematic, ubiquitous feature of public schooling for U.S. minorities). This use of a generic curriculum is frequently further aggravated by culturally and socially distant teachers who teach the exam through traditional, teacher-centered, lecture formats.

Important lessons about culture can be learned from the experiences of one high school Latina female teacher, Ms. Moreno (pseudonym) who teaches in one of the larger, virtually all-Mexican high schools. Through a rather energetic and lively style of teaching that includes "TAAS Pep Rallies" for her students, a majority of students in her classes every semester are able to pass the test.

When asked why they were able to learn from Ms. Moreno, students often referred to her use of "cariño" (or "affection") in the classroom. They also said that she taught "the Mexican way," meaning that she used a lot of Spanish in the classroom and welcomed a high degree of interaction. An excerpt from an LEP student's written commentary about her heroic teacher appears below (in her exact words):

> One of the heroes I know is Ms. ____, she is a person that cares about people. I have her TAAS class and she is teachers in a way that everybody can understand her because, she talks in Spanish, and English. I think she is a strong person. Because she spent many hours teaching her students in the mornings and afternoons, she is always telling us that we can come to her room during our lunch period that she is going to be ready to teaches us. I come during my lunch period and she teaches me every problem I don't understand, and I feel very comfortable with her because she treats us like friends not like a student. (Written

assignment for an English class by a senior female student at Seguín dated September 14, 1994)

She was so committed to helping students pass the test that she, of her own accord and without additional pay, held seven o'clock in the morning, weekday classes, five days a week, to help students pass the TAAS. As one can see from her student's letter, her lunch hours were also dedicated to helping children. Through her commitment, cultural sensitivity, and her Mexican brand of caring, she was able to help more children pass the test as a single individual than most of her colleagues combined. She embodies the ethos that Ladson-Billings (1994) identifies as central to culturally relevant pedagogy for African American youth. Motivated by a sense of shared fate and shared cultural assumptions, effective teachers of African American children see their role as one of "giving back to the community." Ms. Moreno was no different and just as effective.

Ms. Moreno attributed her success—and in contrast, the majority of her colleagues' lack of success—to the following: test anxiety and teachers' inability to teach to "this population." To prepare her students, she used typical English as a Second Language (ESL) methodologies even if her students were not in the ESL program (i.e., were Mexican American). She lamented her colleagues' penchant for teaching TAAS math through standard, teacher-centered lecture formats. She viewed manipulatives as particularly essential because they help students visualize relationships and therefore make sense of, and retain, information. While she was a firm believer that multi-sensory approaches work best for underprivileged youth, Ms. Moreno's capacity to help her students rise to her expectations were also clearly mediated by culturally-relevant pedagogy.

The research literature is clear that the learning of abstractions which have little connection to children's lives and cultures, or which present a monocultural, technical view of knowledge, yield little in long-term learning (e.g., Ladson-Billings 1994; Valenzuela 1999). It is unfortunate and of great consequence that problems of abstractions and technical, fragmented

sorts of facts and formulas associated with the TAAS combine with an historic inability of non-minority, middle-class teachers to promote widespread academic success with minority, low-income youth in segregated settings (DeVillar et al. 1994). This Latina female teacher's example strongly suggests how real academic achievement among underprivileged youth can be virtually guaranteed through cultural awareness, sensitivity and a commitment to social justice that no commercial test-prep materials can possibly package.

The TAAS exit test is particularly inappropriate for Limited English Proficient (LEP) students.

The TAAS exit test results in a gap in student achievement that may be directly attributed to the test and not to students' abilities. As newcomers at the high school level, non-fluent speaks of English are typically placed in the English as a Second Language (ESL) curriculum (or "the ESL ghetto," as one scholar refers to it [Valdés, 1998]; Valenzuela [1999] refers to this placement practice in her own work as "cultural tracking"). In the ESL track, much of their day is spent in courses that focus on English vocabulary and English reading *without regard to their prior academic training* while their remaining subject matter courses are characteristically remedial and rarely, if ever, honors or college-bound. Removing immigrants' much-needed (though often deficient) school-administered language support systems should not be inferred, but rather several key consequences of "cultural tracking" merit focused attention since they directly relate to LEP students' test performance.

If lucky, LEP students are placed in ESL subject matter courses like "ESL-Math" and "ESL-Biology" that approximate courses offered in the regular, mainstream English-only track. Teachers offering these courses tend to be sensitive to issues that face language learners, particularly the sheer amount of time it takes to learn a second language as young adults (which researchers place at between 5 and 7 years to acquire native fluency). Consequently, teachers offer these subject matter courses to keep students from falling behind academically while they learn English. As one Seguín ESL teacher phrased it, "It's unfair to put their academics on hold

while they (students) take time out to learn the language." Another motivation for teaching these courses, observed among ESL teachers, is their recognition of ample academic talent among their immigrant population. They seek to capitalize on and nurture immigrant students' talents in and through ESL subject matter courses.

Theory would predict the prevalence of academic talent among many ESL youth, especially those schooled in their own country for many years prior to entering U.S. schools (Cummins 1984; Skutnabb-Kangas and Cummins 1988). That is, the more a student is schooled in one's first language, the greater their conceptual grasp of academic subject matter (e.g., punctuation, how to summarize, arrive at conclusions, write papers, etc.). The greater their grasp of academic subject matter, the easier it is to transfer this knowledge to the second language.

Unfortunately, the more common situation in high schools even throughout the Southwestern United States is a scarcity of ESL subject matter courses either because of a lack resources to offer such courses or because of philosophical opposition or both (Olsen 1997; Valdés 1998). This results in ESL-remedial course placements which in turn stalls their learning of the mainstream curriculum. This process masks how the intellectual abilities and potential of so many talented immigrant students get compromised.

To appreciate and understand the magnitude of this waste in talent, one has to consider the characteristics of the immigrant population. Research shows that Mexican immigrants are a select group with average education levels that are higher than the national average for Mexico. They are risk-takers able to delay gratification by accumulating capital to effectuate their passage across the border (for reviews, see Buriel 1987, 1994). Studies, including Valenzuela's (1999), further show immigrants and their children possess a progressive orientation toward schools and U.S. society, generally. Moreover, since only 15 percent of the middle-school-aged population attend secondary school in Mexico, to come across a critical mass of such students at the high school level is to encounter a truly "elite" crowd that their ESL and Spanish language teachers readily recognize.

What must be considered is that Mexico has a challenging national curriculum which is publicly subsidized and thus accessible to most through the sixth year. By the fourth grade, students know the anatomy of the human body. By the sixth grade, students take the equivalent of ninth-grade level geometry in the U.S.

Unfortunately, however, because most school personnel are not sensitive to these kinds of possibilities—either because they cannot read a transcript from Mexico or because they simply assume that a good education is not possible there—youth get systematically channeled into the "ESL ghetto." Even in instances when they are allowed to enjoy subject matter courses, since none of these courses are offered at an honors' level, immigrant youth are systematically denied the opportunity to achieve at an advanced academic level. This structure helped me to understand immigrant youth who told me that they used to know math, or who told me that they used to be smarter. In a word, many were "de-skilled" as a result of having been schooled in the U.S.[4]

Even if one considers that some amount of de-skilling is occurring, the quantitative part of the Seguin High School study arrived at three significant and interrelated findings. First, within the regular, non-honors, track, immigrant youth outperform their U.S.-born counterparts. In multivariate analysis, these differences were consistently statistically significant, suggesting that immigrant youth have an edge, academically speaking. A second finding from survey data corroborated in the ethnographic account is that immigrant youth experience school significantly

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[4]A caveat is in order here. Though Valenzuela observed a critical mass of highly adept immigrant/LEP youth in my study, not all immigrant youth come with advanced academic skills (for example, see Olsen 1997). While the issue of cultural tracking would persist, other additional issues would also have to be taken into account. For instance, many of these youth will perform poorly because they have been incorrectly assigned to courses, because of a lack of availability of support services, unfamiliarity with testing and limited or no test-taking skills, cultural biases within the test, and test-taking anxiety. When students come to the U.S. with limited prior educational experiences, they are indeed among the most vulnerable to academic failure.

more positively than their U.S.-born peers. That is, they see teachers as more caring and accessible than their U.S.-born counterparts, and they rate the school climate in more positive terms as well. They are also much less likely to evade school rules and policies. These students' attitudes contrast markedly with that of their second- and third-generation counterparts whose responses in turn are not significantly different from one another. Particularly striking is how generational status—and not gender or curriculum track placement—influences orientations toward schooling. These findings concur with research from numerous other large- and small-scale studies (e.g., Matute-Bianchi 1991; Kao and Tienda 1995). Third, the level of schooling youth attain in Mexico or Latin America and students' grades are significantly correlated. That is, for each year of schooling attained in Mexico or Latin America, achievement goes up, even after controlling for the quality of education they received (based on a subjective measure of school quality).

These three pieces of evidence together suggest that immigrant youth should be passing the TAAS test. Since their chances of passing the TAAS test are lower than their English-dominant counterparts, it is logical to assume that their poor passing rates on the TAAS test suggest more their difficulties with the English language nature of the test, than their potential to achieve academically at a high level. Their teachers frequently refer to this barrier as a chief explanation. In short, children of limited English proficiency are especially handicapped in their ability to exhibit their knowledge by the TAAS exit test.

In conclusion, the TAAS is a ticket to nowhere. It is harmful to instruction by its rigid format, its artificial treatment of subject matter, its embodiment of discredited learning theories, its ignoring of children's cultures and languages, and its emphasis on the accounting of prescribed learning. The test itself, and the system of testing and test preparation, have in poor and minority schools come to supplant the opportunity for high quality, meaningful learning.

This system of testing is therefore not the benign "reform" its political advocates claim. Nor is it the remedy for a mal-functioning bureaucratic system that is merely in need of stricter

internal management and accountability. It exerts a direct, negative impact on the curriculum, creating new problems outlined herein and exacerbating old ones related to historic inequities between rich, majority and poor, minority children. In addition, it masks the real problems of inequity that underlie the failure to adequately educate children. By shifting funds, public attention and scarce organizational and budgetary resources away from schools and into the coffers of the testing industry vendors, the futures of poor and minority children and the schools they attend get comprised.

For the children, successful performance on the TAAS in no way insures either a quality education or a promising future. An education aimed at TAAS scores does unequivocally reduce children's chances for a real education. The pressure to raise scores is greatest in our poorest, historically least-well-funded schools. In order to raise scores absent a major investment in teacher knowledge, school facilities and instructional materials in those schools means that educators in those schools are diverting time, energy and dollars away from the kind of instruction available in middle class schools and into materials whose only purpose is to raise TAAS scores. We conclude with a story from Seguin High School that poignantly captures the human side of this misdirected and injurious policy:

> I attended Seguin's high school's graduation ceremony. In the middle of the ceremony after the class song was played, about eight students stood up to chant the words scrawled on a large banner they held in their hands: "14 YEARS OF SCHOOL. MADE IT THIS FAR. WHY CAN'T WE WALK?" After the students chanted these phrases several times, three cops and six ushers approached the crowd to take away their banners. The audience booed the cops, including all or most of the graduates sitting in their seats. The hundreds of boos that included parents brought the ceremony to a halt. Some students were escorted out of the audience by the police while others left on their own. I could clearly see how this state-level policy of linking the TAAS test to high school graduation was sensed by everyone as unjust.

It was only too fitting to see how this policy was "policed" in a final show of force to the would-be high school grads. (Valenzuela's June 5, 1996 field notes)

Rather than youth failing schools, schools are failing our minority youth through the TAAS system of testing. In short, we fail to see how the state's interest is served by a policy that simultaneously diminishes young people's access to a substantive education and closes off their opportunity for a high school graduation, especially when this route represents their best hope for a socially productive life.

There is a critical need for independent research which examines the effects of the TAAS system of testing on the curriculum in various school subjects, on children's capacities to learn and their sense of themselves as learners; on teachers' work and on teacher exit (especially highly educated and highly qualified, effective teachers) from Texas public schools where TAAS is aligned with administrative bonuses and "performance contracts." Virtually none of the effects on teaching, curriculum and children which we summarize here are captured by analyses and re-analyses of individual or aggregate test score data. In addition, there is a need for studies which do not rely merely on officially reported data on test scores and on tested students. There has been much analysis if the test score numbers, including their disaggregation by race; however, such studies have primarily relied on numbers provided by the state education agency and/or school districts. Such studies are also carried out primarily by analysts employed by or on contract to the state or employed by organizations with continuing state contracts for such studies or contracts for "TAAS implementation," TAAS consulting or "teacher/administrative training" based on TAAS. There is a need for independent research into the economics and political forces behind this system of testing and its promulgation across state legislatures and governors (and of business groups and test vendors advising them.) The reliance within these testing and accountability systems on discredited theories of learning and on artificial representations of curricular content stems from the unexamined assumptions that permit the testing of children to be used for systems of management (and political) accountability. Research into ways these

organizational, economic and political forces are reshaping teaching and learning, and as a result restratifying children's opportunities to learn, would be for more productive than more studies on test question "validity" or race-based trends in test scores. Helpful research studies would have to rely on field-based data across widely diverse student populations and school settings and would need to include the voices of educators and student, in order to capture the complex dynamics which are currently rendered invisible by the present reliance on narrow sets of indicators. The effects on children from this system of testing need to be brought to light if we are to assure that our public schools serve all children well.

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